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Business is mushrooming

Former Navy SEAL overcame a learning logjam to build fungi farm

By Sarah Fritschner
sfritschner@courier-journal.com
 The Courier-Journal

"Sheltowee" is the Shawnee term for big turtle. As the story goes, it was how the American Indians described Daniel Boone when they saw him in the forest with a large pack on his back.

For Billy Webb, who pronounces it "shuh TAH ee," the description fits the shiitake mushrooms that grow in the shady bottomland of his father's farm in Bath County, about 50 miles east of Lexington, Ky., on the western edge of Daniel Boone National Forest.

When Webb retired from Navy Special Operations in 2001, the Pike County native moved to Lexington



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alternative to tobacco. He told Webb that they had hired a mushroom consultant, an expert, to help people make the transition.

Webb was intrigued. His father's farm had lots of scrub trees that might provide the logs on which he could grow the mushrooms, and there were lots of shady clearings to provide the right growing environment. He thought the family could make a living being mushroom farmers.

The mushroom expert said you could get a pound of mushrooms from every 4-foot log every nine to 10 weeks and harvest three crops every season for four years. And you could charge upward of \$9 per pound.

It sounded like a good bet for Webb, who had his Navy pension to carry him through those initial 18 months without a crop.

"You talk about doing something wrong," said Webb about his beginnings as a mushroom farmer.

He and his father, Elmer, standing in a clearing surrounded by 11,000 logs, described how they'd soak the logs to mimic the melting winter snows in Japan where the shiitake is native.

The process required lifting logs into a trailer, driving them up to the lake,

where his wife, Becky, would be closer to her family in Ohio, and where they would raise their four sons. Webb went to work for state government helping economic development in Eastern Kentucky.

As Webb tells it, he was riding around Eastern Kentucky one day with an agriculture agent who described mushroom growing in Kentucky as a viable



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Shiitakes can be grown on hardwood logs for four years, but they prefer freshly felled oak logs. Billy Webb checked some shiitakes growing on logs at his Bath County farm. Photos by Rebecca Webb



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Shiitake mushroom and Brie "pizza" is different.

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unloading them into the lake, lifting the sodden logs -- about 35 pounds each on average -- back onto the trailer and unloading them into stacks. The first year, they soaked 7,700 logs.

"You've handled them four times by then," said Webb, rubbing the small of his back for effect. He says he knows a woman who sunk everything she had into setting up a mushroom operation, only to throw her back out the first time she started lifting the logs.

In the end, after drilling each log with 50 holes, inoculating the holes, and covering the holes with wax, the Webbs -- Billy, Elmer and Becky -- learned a few things about what the mushroom expert said.

They learned a log may yield a pound of mushrooms the first time, and maybe the second time. But each subsequent yield is smaller.

And the mushrooms don't grow well on random scrub or even a variety of hardwood. They like oak, and the oak has to be freshly felled, not stuff that's been lying around the woods for months.

Webb buys his logs from locals who collect them by following logging crews, who leave wood that's only 6 inches in diameter.

The Webbs put a soaker tub in the middle of the clearing so the logs can be soaked where they'll be stacked. Billy and Elmer are constructing a climate-controlled building where shiitakes can grow during the colder months, providing income year-round.

And they've built an insulated hoop house that is both air-conditioned and heated. It's filled with perforated bags hanging from metal supports. The bags are filled with water-soaked cottonseed and straw and from them grow 18 different varieties of oyster mushrooms, including a gorgeous South American one with a golden hue and a hint of citrus.

All of these mushrooms show up on dinner plates from Jean Robert @ Pigall's in Cincinnati to 211 Clover Lane in Louisville and in the produce bin at Whole Foods Market.

Three years ago, the Webbs were harvesting 200 pounds of mushrooms a week. Now, they pick 100 pounds a day, all organically certified, all delivered

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within 24 hours of harvesting.

Despite the steep learning curve, Webb said "the gamble has paid off." Not just for him and his family, but for the economy of Eastern Kentucky.

Reporter Sarah Fritschner can be reached at (502) 582-4203.

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Great article. Before I read it I didn't know Shitake from Shinola. Seriously.

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